Eco-warrior sent to psychiatric hospital

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Body

France's most colourful eco-warrior, Eric Petetin, also known as The Indian, has been taken to a psychiatric hospital by gendarmes after his 12-year struggle to stop a road tunnel being built through a Pyrenean national park.

Before his arrest at the weekend, he told the press that the police were preparing to lock him up as a "nutcase" to pre-empt a final assault on a plan which threatens the habitat of the last colony of French bears.

As the leader of a group called The Drop of Water, Mr Petetin has been fined about 30 times since 1988 and jailed eight times for protests along the rural Aspe valley, where a highway is also being built.

A judge at Pau, Thierry Pons, opened the way to confinement a fortnight ago when he ordered the eco-warrior, who is famous for the vulture's feather he wears in his hair, to undergo hospital tests after he was fined for destroying equipment used to build the EU-financed Somport tunnel between France and Spain.

Mr Petetin, whose protest has attracted support from thousands of European ecologists, said his occasional "irrational behaviour" was due to "smoking too much pot, or a bad night's sleep", not insanity.

But police said his arrest was provoked by a revolt more dangerous than irrational behaviour, and that he had been confined to a psychiatric hospital because he was mentally unfit to follow normal judicial procedures.

According to a gendarmerie report from Pau, a woman motorist said she was forced to hand over her car to Mr Petetin in the village of Oloron-Sainte -Marie on Sunday. "Police cars pursued the stolen vehicle through the streets after Petetin had been seen jumping on the roof shouting there were too many vehicles in the world and they should be eliminated," the report said. "His escape attempt caused several collisions."

A central government official signed the confinement order, but Mr Petetin's lawyers are expected to claim that it is an attempt to silence the former scientific researcher, who has been at the centre of environmental protests since 1968.

Surrounded by a dozen mostly middle class "tribesmen", the eco-warrior set up his headquarters in a disused railway station near the planned tunnel in 1988. A decision to evict the protesters led to a hunger strike last month. Several pitched battles have been fought on the frontier with Spain, killing one protester and injuring dozens.

A permanent police presence has not prevented repeated sabotage but has enabled construction work to go ahead, despite pledges by the Socialist-led government to scale down the project.

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